The Sense of Place

From "The Sense of Place" by Wallace Stegner
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If you don't know where you are, says Wendell Berry, you don't know *who* you are. Berry is a writer, one of our best, who after some circling has settled on the bank of the Kentucky River, where he grew up and where his family has lived for many generations. He conducts his literary explorations inward, toward the core of what supports him physically and spiritually. He belongs to an honorable tradition, one that even in America includes some great names: Thoreau, Burroughs, Frost, Faulkner, Steinbeck – lovers of known earth, known weathers, and known neighbors both human and nonhuman. He calls himself a "placed" person.

But if every American is several people, and one of them is or would like to be a placed person, another is the opposite, the displaced person, cousin not to Thoreau but to Daniel Boone, dreamer not of Walden Ponds but of far horizons, traveler not in Concord but in wild unsettled places, explorer not inward but outward. Adventurous, restless, seeking, asocial or antisocial, the displaced American persists by the million long after the frontier has vanished. He exists to some extent in all of us, the inevitable by-product of our history: the New World transient. He is commoner in the newer parts of America – the West, Alaska – than in the older parts, but he occurs everywhere, always in motion.

To the placed person he seems hasty, shallow, and restless. He has a current like the Platte, a mile wide and inch deep. As a species, he is non-territorial, he lacks a stamping ground. Acquainted with many places, he is rooted in none. Culturally he is a discarder or transplanter, not a builder or conserver. He even seems to like and value his rootlessness, though to the placed person he shows the symptoms of nutritional deficiency, as if he suffered from some obscure scurvy or pellagra of the soul.

Migratoriness has its dangers, unless it is the traditional, seasonal, social migratoriness of shepherd tribes, or of the academic tribes who every June leave Cambridge or New Haven for summer places in Vermont, and every September return to their winter range. Complete independence, absolute freedom of movement, are exhilarating for a time but may not wear well. That romantic atavist we sometimes dream of being, who lives alone in a western or arctic wilderness, playing Natty Bumppo and listening to the loons and living on moose meat and moving on if people come within a hundred miles, is a very American figure but he is not a full human being. He is a wild man of the woods, a Sasquatch.

He has many relatives who are organized as families – migrant families that would once have followed the frontier but that now follow construction booms from Rock Springs to Prudhoe Bay, or pursue the hope of better times from Michigan to Texas, or retire from the Midwestern farm to St. Petersburg or Sunshine City, or still hunt the hippie heaven from Sedona to Telluride to sand Point. These migrants drag their exposed roots and have trouble putting them down in new places. Some don't want to put them down, but at retirement climb into their RVs and move with the seasons from national park to national park, creating a roadside society out of perpetual motion. The American home is often a mobile home.

I know about this. I was born on wheels, among just such a family. I know about the excitement of newness and possibility, but also know the dissatisfaction and hunger that result from placelessness. Some towns that we lived in were never real to me. They were only the raw material of places, as I was the raw material of a person. Neither place nor I had a chance of being anything unless we could live together for a while. I spent my youth envying people who had lived all their lives in the houses they were born in, and had attics full of proof that they *had* lived.

The deep ecologists warn us not to be anthropocentric, but I know no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes. I know that it wasn't created especially for my use, and I share the guilt for what the members of my species, especially the migratory ones, have done to it. But I am the only instrument that I have access to by which I can enjoy the world and try to understand it. So I must believe that, at least to human perception, a place is not a place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, lived in it, known it, died in it – have both experienced and shaped it, as individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities, over more than one generation. Some are born in their place, some find it, some realize after long searching that the place they left is the one they have been searching for. But whatever their relation to it, it is made a place only by slow accrual, like a coral reef.

Once, as George Stewart reminded us in Names on the Land, the continent stretched away westward without names. It had no places in it until people had named them, and worn the names smooth with use. The fact that Daniel Boone killed a bear at a certain spot in Kentucky did not make it a place. It began to be one, though, when he remembered the spot as Bear Run, and other people picked up the name and called their settlement by it, and when the settlement became a landmark or destination for travelers, and when the children had worn paths through its woods to the schoolhouse or swimming hole. The very fact that people remembered Boone's bear-killing, and told about it, added something of placeness.

No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. Fictions serve as well as facts. Rip Van Winkle, though a fiction, enriches

the Catskills. Real-life Mississippi spreads across unmarked boundaries into Yoknapatawpha County. Every one of the six hundred rocks from which the Indian maiden jumped to escape her pursuers grows by the legend, and people's lives get lived around and into it. It attracts family picnics and lovers' trysts. There are names carved in the trees there. Just as surely as do the quiet meadows and stone walls of Gettysburg, or the grassy hillside above the Little Big Horn where the Seventh Cavalry died, even a "phony" place like the Indian maiden's rock grows by human association.

In America the process of cumulative association has gone a good way by now in stable, settled, and especially rural areas – New England, the Midwest, the South – but hardly any way at all in the raw, migrant west. For one thing, the West has been raided more often than settled, and raiders move on when they have got what they came for. Many western towns never lasted a single human lifetime. Many others have changed so fast that memory cannot cling to them; they are unrecognizable to anyone who knew them twenty years ago. And as they change, they may fall into the hands of planners and corporations, so that they tend to become more and more alike. Change too often means stereotype. Try Gillette, Wyoming, not too long ago a sleepy cowtown on the verge of becoming a real place, now a coal boomtown that will never be a place.

Changing everywhere, America changes fastest west of the 100th meridian. Mining booms, oil booms, irrigation booms, tourist booms, culture booms as at Aspen and Sun Valley, crowd out older populations and bring in new ones. Communities lose their memory along with their character. For some, the memory can over time be reinstated. For many, the memory too will be a transient, for irrigation agribusinesses from California and Arizona to Idaho has by now created a whole permanent underclass of the migrant and dispossessed, totally placeless people who will never have a chance to settle down anywhere, who will know a place briefly during the potato or cantaloupe or grape harvest, and then they move on.

As with life, so with literature. Except in northern California, the West has never had a real literary outpouring, a flowering of the sort that marked New England, the Midwest, and the South. As I have noted elsewhere, a lot of what has been written is a literature of motion, not of a place. There is a whole tradition of it, from Mark Twain's Roughing It to Kerouac's On the Road. Occasionally we get loving place-oriented books such as Ivan Doig's This House of Sky and Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It, but even while we applaud them we note that they are only memorials to places that used to be, not celebrations of ongoing places. They are nostalgic before history has taken its second step, as much a looking-back as Huckleberry Finn was for Mark Twain.

And that is a curious phenomenon, that nostalgia that has marked American writing ever since Irving and Cooper. From our very beginnings, and in the midst of our perpetual motion, we have

been homesick for the old folks at home and the old oaken bucket. We have been forever bidding farewell to the last of the Mohicans, or the last of the old-time cattlemen, or the last of the pioneers with the bark on, or the vanishing wilderness. Just at random, read Will Cather's A Lost Lady or Conrad Richter's The Sea of Grass or Larry McMurtry's Horseman, Pass By, or even William Dean Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham, with its portrait of a businessman possessed of an antique and doomed integrity. We have made a tradition out of mourning the passing of things we never had time really to know, just as we have made a culture out of the open road, out of movement without place.

Freedom, especially free land, has been largely responsible. Nothing in our history has bound us to a plot of ground as feudalism once bound Europeans. In older, smaller, more homogeneous and traditional countries, life was always more centripetal, held in tight upon its center. In Ireland, for example, Yeats tells us, "there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some event or legend.... I would have our writers and craftsmen of many kinds master this history and these legends, and fix upon their memory the appearance of mountains and rivers and make it all visible again in their arts, so that Irishmen, even though they had gone thousands of miles away, would still be in their own country."

America is both too large and too new for that sort of universal recognition. It was just the lack of such recognitions and acceptance, the lack of a complex American society rooted in richly remembered places, that led Washington Irving to transplant European legends to the Catskills, and Hawthorne to labor at creating what he called a usable past. The same lacks drove Henry James, later, to exploit his countrymen not as dwellers in their own country but more often as pilgrims and tourists abroad, hunting what their own country did not provide. When native themes, characters, and places did emerge, they were likely to be local-colorish, exploiting the local picturesque and probably mourning its passing, or expressions of our national restlessness, part of the literature of the road.

Indifferent to, or contemptuous of, or afraid to commit ourselves to, our physical and social surroundings, always hopeful of something better, hooked on change, a lot of us have never stayed in one place long enough to learn it, or have learned it only to leave it. In our displaced condition we are not unlike the mythless man that Carl Jung wrote about, who lives "like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society. He…lives a life of his own, sunk in a subjective mania of his own devising, which he believes to be the newly discovered truth."

Back to Wendell Berry, and his belief that if you don't know where you are you don't know who you are. He is not talking about the kind of location that can be determined by looking at a map or a

street sign. He is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe. He is talking about the knowledge of place that comes from working in it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophes, loving its morning or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labor and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it. He is talking about the knowing that poets specialize in.

It is only a step from his pronouncement to another: that no place is a place until it has had a poet. And that is about what Yeats was saying only a moment ago.

No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that at its highest reach we will call poetry. What Frost did for New Hampshire and Vermont, what Faulkner did for Mississippi and Steinbeck for the Salinas Valley, Wendell Berry is doing for his family corner of Kentucky, and hundreds of other place-loving people, gifted or not, are doing for places they were born in, or reared in, or have adopted and made their own.

I doubt that we will ever get the motion out of the Americans, for everything in his culture of opportunity and abundance has, up to now, urged motion on him as a form of virtue. Our tradition of restlessness will not be outgrown in a generation or two, even if the motives for restlessness are withdrawn. But after all, in a few months it will be half a millennium since Europeans first laid eyes on this continent. At least in geographical terms, the frontiers have been explored and crossed. It is probably time we settled down. It is probably time we looked around us instead of looking ahead. We have no business, any longer, in being impatient with history. We need to know our history in much greater depth, even back to geology, which, as Henry Adams said, is only history projected a little way back from Mr. Jefferson.

History was part of the baggage we threw overboard when we launched ourselves into the New World. We threw it away because it recalled old tyrannies, old limitations, galling obligations, bloody memories. Plunging into the future through a landscape that had no history, we did both the country and ourselves some harm along with some good. Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging.

"The land was ours before we were the land's," says Robert Frost's poem. Only in the act of submission is the sense of place realized and a sustainable relationship between people and earth established.